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# In uncertain times, the social capital of group relationships in workplaces may be the key to growth and resilience.

*LSE British Politics and Policy Blog*

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/social-capital-at-work/>

*The value of social capital has been bandied about by policymakers as if a new, valuable resource for employers and governments has suddenly been discovered. But now that we have put a price on it, will relationships be downgraded in this era of social capitalism? In the fourth article of her continuing series on public policy, work, and mental health, **Elizabeth Cotton** argues that personal and group relationships provide real opportunities for psychological growth and resilience.*

The psychoanalyst **Robert Money-Kyrle** neatly defines the basic facts of life. We are all dependent on other people for survival, we are not the centre of the entire universe and can be excluded from things, and we all die. Don't panic, I'm not discussing death in this post, but I would like to pick up on the issue of dependency and our national interest in what has become known as "social capital," i.e. relationships with other people. I'm not sure that we needed reminding of the fact that we are important to each other, particularly during periods of crisis.

But there is something strangely difficult about admitting that life is impossible without other people and acting accordingly. Perhaps it is cultural (how *gauche* to admit I need you) and cuts against our prized independence and individualism (what? I'm nothing without *you*?). It's also dangerous because it upsets the conservative order of things where friends and family are your concern and everyone else is not. It's less of a headache to see your interests as connected only to people that you love (including in a virtual way) than to worry about things like social policy or maintaining real social networks.

Sadly this romantic idea is tested to the extreme during an economic crisis. Any relationship where one person is unemployed faces challenges. Feelings get stirred up—often rather unattractive ones like irritation, anger and loss of sexual desire. These emotions may be triggered because someone reliable has become unreliable, upsetting the status quo and reversing roles within relationships in which providers stop providing and lovers become carers. People with pre-existing mental health problems find their problems returning and couples are faced with agonising choices about how to care for each other and still keep all the wheels moving.

The charity **Rethink** runs one of the few precious support services for carers despite there being an estimated 1.5 million adults and children caring for someone struggling with mental illness. Stigma attaches itself not just to the mentally ill but also their families, making it a massively underestimated group of people which many of us probably work with on a daily basis. The pressure that relationships are under is reflected in the increase in **domestic violence** that can be traced to economic crisis and the rise in serious mental

illness and breakdown. Relationships and families break down not just because of hard financial realities but facing the psychic realities that people we love can disappoint us. There is also an enormous sense of shame around having difficulties in our relationships at work. During a recession people who are facing redundancy often experience the shame that would probably be better placed with the employer. It explains why so many people actually leave their jobs voluntarily rather than fight for their position; jump before you're pushed. Sometimes we actually agree with our employers that our work is not important or valuable enough. This phenomenon is a dangerous collusion between hearing an external voice from an employer (you're not valuable) and internal voice (I'm not valuable). If you already have a poor sense of yourself and your place in the world, like most people with mental illness do, these external factors can hit you like a bus. Shame isolates and inhibits our relationships because our difficulties become unspoken and therefore imperceptible or ignorable to the people we work with.

There is something deeply anti-relationship about many people's reactions to threat, often a very real sense of 'fight or flight'. Adrenaline shoots through our veins and fists start forming. At this point if your sense of being rooted in your workplace or your relationships is weak, the obvious reaction is to run. This retreat into flight is fundamentally rejecting, leaving behind people, organisations and careers that have often been built up over entire lifetimes.

The majority of 'flights,' however, are internal, resulting in a retreat from contact with others. John Steiner's book *Psychic Retreats* beautifully explores the defensive formation of mental bunkers that both protect us from perceived threats but also cut us off from reality and other people. Steiner describes this internal order as a mafia-like structure that re-establishes a sense of security by providing an internal organisation. Like the real mafia, it operates in an economy of threats (don't you *dare* question the order) and the offer of protection (if you accept the order then you will be safe). This nasty controlling internal organisation uses a script that tells us things about ourselves – that we are bad, cannot have anything, deserve to fail and above all things, should not question this organisation. This predictable, assured and relatively secure psychic reality comes at the expense of living in the real world and fundamentally denies the possibility of positive change. This organisation acts as a paralysing force, making it hard to break out of essentially destructive and anti-life states of mind.



Credit: Shelley Mannion (Creative Commons NC)

Another problem with relationships relates to our actual experiences of **being in groups**, such as the workplace. If you ask most people if they like groups they will say no, precisely because they can make us feel afraid and persecuted. The experience of being in groups raises powerful feelings in us, often taking us back to earlier **experiences of being in the family**. Our family experiences go a long way to explain our relationships with people at work, but unchallenged they often leave us feeling infantilized and overwhelmed at the prospect that nothing ever changes.

One of the most difficult and profound learning experiences used in some psychology clinical training programmes are Experiential Groups, where small groups of students spend an hour a week “experiencing the group”. I spent a year of my life having weekly experiential group meetings with eight other people. During this period I learned an enormous amount about myself, most of it massively unattractive and disturbing to my carefully manicured sense of who I am. Subsequently I never start a sentence with the words “I’m the kind of person who.....”. In my mind I am someone who has a particular role and position in my relationships, influenced heavily and unconsciously by growing up in a small rural community and being a twin. In groups, however, we learn that the roles can change with different people and within groups at different points in our lives. During crises certain roles are emphasised and others denied – the hero, depressed, angry, resistant to change, the stoic. Just as everyone with a past life was Cleopatra or Anthony we like to think that we are all heroes. The reality is that we are capable of being all things, including both bullies and victims of scapegoating.

The power of experiences in groups is that they reveal that nothing is predetermined and that we are all capable of change and adaptation. This is highly liberating, and explains the importance of work to our psychic development and personal growth. But you have to live with the knowledge that yes, you too, can be the mean-spirited passive-aggressive at work that quite enjoys other people’s humiliating professional failures. Being in relationships are so hard precisely because they challenge our idealisations about ourselves, both good and bad.

Experiences in groups also show us that the people that have a role in your survival at work are not always the people you love or intimately tied to. This is most clear if you look at union membership. Joining a union when your job is at risk is not a complex decision; it’s a necessity that most working people understand. Collective power and legal expertise

are two very important reasons for joining, as well as the fact that it **can make us happy**. But this does not mean that you actually love your representative. Many reps (I say this as someone who has worked for and within trade unions for most of my adult life) are not all that likeable. Some actually dislike their own membership, much like teachers who hate children and librarians who don't read; a perversion that exists in most professions. But also they are not likeable because we don't want them to be. We want them to be single-minded, angry and threatening with management so it's a bit much to then insist they have the manners of a Swiss finishing school graduate.

Our relationships with other members, often hilarious and well, lovely, can also be fractious. What is important here is that we understand emotionally that collectivising is central to our survival because it offers us a way to grow and adapt (the definition of resilience) in a way that we cannot do alone and a profound sense of place and support in the process. In today's workplace that is priceless. It does mean accepting the uncomfortable, irritating and often ridiculous behaviour and views of other people. When you've got over that, you might find that some of them are actually quite nice. They might not love you or think you're a hero but they can help you move from a victim of work to a survivor of work.